

**Oracy and education: perspective shifts and policy tensions (Editorial)**

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Draft Editorial

## **Special Issue of *Literacy*: Oracy and Education: perspective shifts and policy tensions**

**Guest Editors: Karen Daniels and Roberta Taylor**

In 2003, Henrietta Dombey and Neil Mercer edited an issue of *Literacy* focussed on classroom talk and literacy, presenting many papers which explored an emerging site of interest at the time — talk around computers. In our post-pandemic world, we can scarcely imagine education scenarios without electronic communication. Since 2003, it would appear that the notion of oracy has become palatable to policy advisors to the point where an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) was convened in the UK to review the role and importance of oracy for classroom learning. The 2021 UKLA International Conference's focus on spoken language in literacy learning and teaching provided the impetus for this special issue on oracy. This collection of papers answers the call for research from different perspectives on human communication and embraces the embodied, multilingual and culturally diverse nature of oracy and the implications of those perspectives for policy and practice.

Valuing student repertoires for communication is a key theme within this Special Issue, whether these tend to the official curricular expectations of pupils, or the more informal and seemingly chaotic and 'unstructured', but highly productive, episodes of classroom chatter that may go unacknowledged or even be stifled by curricular mandates and attempts to standardise language. These perspectives expose deeply ethical questions about oracy, and education overall. Whose voices count in our education system? In what ways are the voices and ways of being and expressing of those from diverse social-economic and ethnic groups discounted or undervalued, in favour of the standard form of English foregrounded in the current National Curriculum in England? A deficit view of linguistic diversity dominates policy in England, despite challenges to harmful discourses such as those associated with the notion of 'word gaps' and conceptions of 'language rich' and 'language poor' learners. The call for papers for this Special Issue was motivated by a desire to provide a collection of articles that would offer a counter narrative to such reductive discourses, and expose the inequalities that such perspectives produce, perpetuate, and uphold. The articles take us to classrooms in multilingual contexts in South Africa, the USA, Zambia, Australia, Cyprus, Scotland, Norway, and England, many with standard English dominated curricular mandates.

The descriptions of classroom talk in this Special Issue go far beyond the words that pupils say. The articles consider the significance of the multiple modes and bodily movements made by pupils and teachers. They take into account the norms, routines and objects of classroom encounters, and consider the significance of these as they enmesh with pupil's meaning making endeavours. What emerges is an acknowledgement that talk is deeply situated within pupils' ways of being and knowing, and that policy requirements that promote and demand the use of a standard language produce tensions for teachers working with pupils from diverse linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds.

Focusing on black students in the US, Rackley draws our attention the unofficial and often abated 'idle chatter and noise' of classrooms. Guided by Crawley's work, and drawing attention to the bodily sounds, teeth clicking, and bodily movements, Rackley sees chatter – talk and noise, as a cacophony full of movement, rhythm, urgency, persistence and enthusiasm, as an expression of creative and expertise of blackness, and an opportunity of abundant participation and togetherness. Rackley sees the standardised curricular frame as shoring up white settler, colonial epistemologies, leaving little room for the recognition of other ways of voicing and knowing. Literacy educators are urged to listen to their voices and participate in their possibilities.

For Snell and Cushing, dialogic talk is seen as a powerful tool for social and cognitive learning, and crucial to the achievement and social mobility of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, policy prescriptions of standard English use in classrooms militate against the principles and practices of dialogic talk, working counter to the valuing local dialects and supporting children's knowledge about language variety. Snell and Cushing bring teachers and pupils into discussion regarding the policing of non-standard forms in classrooms, drawing attention to the power of unstructured and unrehearsed talk, and how this is important to the formation of shared ideas and pupil thinking.

Hyatt, Escott and Bone draw acute attention to what they describe as the 'resurgence in UK educational policy and debate of the idea that linguistic difference amounts to linguistic, cognitive and cultural deficit' and provide a powerful critique of deficit discourses of regional dialects. They describe their experiences of working with teachers in a school where Ofsted called for improvements in staff's use of standard English with pupils and the ways in which this impacted on teachers, embroiled within the social structures where deficit models of linguistic diversity hold currency. Hyatt et al. dissect the implications of the Ofsted judgement and the process of working with the school in order to reconcile the linguistic repertoires of pupils with the demands of the curriculum, to create an ethos which valued and understood linguistic diversity.

Gannaway takes us to the north of Australia, providing an autoethnographic perspective on the challenges and dilemmas of working in a community where shared language and culture are minimal. Through critical incidents, the author describes her experiences of working as a non-indigenous teacher in the Northern Territory, navigating the interface of working with pupils rich in cultural linguistic diversity, with 17 distinct language and dialects spoken. Acknowledging that meaning making practices differ vastly across cultures and reflect different worldviews, Gannaway challenges government orientations toward standard ways of communicating. In contrast, Gannaway argues for a deep valuing of pupils' repertoires, asking the reader to recognise the connections between knowledge systems and old traditions. Oral cultures are presented as intrinsic to particular ways of seeing the world and thus holding an essential connection to pupil identity.

Two papers in this special issue problematise the notion of oracy, conceptualising talk as intrinsically embodied. Kontovourki sees oracy as inseparable from the meaning making at the intersection of human bodies, materials, and immaterial forces. Kontovourki asks how human bodies and other materials shape literacy and literacy learning. Sharing episodes from an elementary school in Cyprus, the author illustrates how classrooms are bounded yet vibrant spaces where the local history of the specific classrooms and established understandings of literacy inscribe children's and teachers' bodies. By way of contrast, the focus of Hackett's article is the emergence of language as an embodied response to place and movement. Hackett proposes that the purpose of language for young children is not for transparently conveying meaning, but more for a playful experimentation with different kinds of vocalisations.

For Holmes-Henderson et al., supporting children's oracy is about exploring the potential of teaching children how to use rhetoric effectively to express ideas in ways that open-up debate and discussion, and that are closely associated with citizenship education as part of a broader education. Holmes-Henderson et al. take us back to an Isocratean perspective, presenting rhetoric as a formation of the self and providing habits of effective self-expression, thus challenging perceptions of rhetoric as 'spin'.

Chamberlain, Rodriguez-Leon and Woodward share their experiences of working with teachers in South Africa and Zambia to explore the ways in which translanguaging is part of everyday life where

pupils and teachers blend and alternate across languages. Seeing translanguaging as a pedagogical resource that legitimises local languages and cultures and helps pupils to connect their worlds both inside and outside the classroom, Chamberlain et al. describe how the potential of translanguaging is often stymied by restrictive instructional policies.

It is clear from this special issue, that understandings of communication have shifted considerably in recent years. These understandings are yielding deeper insights into the power dynamics inherent in all communication, and the material realities of the lives of pupils. What coheres the perspectives in this selection of papers is a common core conceptualisation of oracy as involving more than a narrow 'standard English' view of what talk in education settings comprises. In these papers oracy embraces standard and non-standard forms, embodied talk, and culturally diverse language forms. Taken together these papers offer global perspectives on talk in literacy learning which despite global and cultural miles of difference, nevertheless, share driving passions for addressing inequity, standing up to colonial epistemologies, challenging standard ways of thinking about communication and empowering teachers and learners to resist examples of deficit learning associated with linguistic diversity. These papers highlight the challenges of inequity in linguistic communication, and at the same time, offer ways of understanding oracy that enables researchers and teachers to challenge deficit views of pupils' communicative repertoires, and begin to work towards a more equitable linguistic landscape.